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Easter 2 • 1 John 1:1-2:2 • April 12, 2015

Drawn into God's Fellowship

Not by accident does this pericope begin where John's gospel does: "that which was from the beginning" is both pegged to and flows from the gospel's prologue. What we have in this brief letter, therefore, is given not merely for just a few, but for those whom God has loved "from the beginning" (1:1) and for "the whole world" (2:2).

Notice first the string of nouns and verbs in 1:1–4. *The* word of life, *the* life, *the* eternal life, *the* Father—all with the definite article which gives a specificity that resists slipping into the abstract. Note also that these all “appeared” (v. 2), which continues further the gospel’s (1:14) emphasis on the divine initiative. What we have in the verbs that follow are human responses to that appearing, namely we have heard, seen, looked at, touched. And the next set of verbs link both the string of nouns and the string of verbs with those who will be hearing/reading this letter, namely we testify, proclaim (1:2,3), declare (1:5). The intent of the appearing and of the seeing is that those blessings be shared with others, and that those addressed be drawn into the fellowship of the ones who have already seen, and indeed be drawn into the fellowship of “the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ” (1:3).

The struggle of the Christian life quickly comes to the fore in the following verses (1:5–7). The gospel’s emphasis on light (Jn 1:9, 3:19, 8:12, 9:5) continues here; in fact, it becomes the chief descriptor of the fellowship, namely as those who not only live but walk in the light (1:7). Where there is darkness, there is neither light nor fellowship, and life is lived as a lie, much as Isaiah (5:20) described it: “those who put darkness for light and light for darkness.” By contrast, where there is active walking in the light, there is life (Gal 5:16, Eph 5:2).

In the remainder of the pericope, attention turns to the reality of sin in the life of those who walk in the light. Scripture does not assume or demand what sinful humans cannot attain. Note what seem to be rather contradictory comments in these verses. In 2:1 another purpose clause seems to express the purpose of the entire pericope, namely “that you will not sin.” That is followed immediately, however, by “but if anybody does sin . . .” Back in 1:8 a claim “to be without sin” is exposed as a delusion, and in 1:10, such a claim is labeled not just a lie, but as a pride that makes a lie of God and of his gifts of forgiveness (1:9) and atonement (2:2). The Christian life, namely walking in the light does not consist of straining for a perfection that exists only in God. The Christian fellowship is a humbler fellowship, namely the fellowship of the forgiven children of God—and it’s not a solitary walk, but a fellowship with each other and with the God who guides us in his light.

Look again at 2:2. The claim of God on the world and on us as children of God is rooted in our Lord’s sacrificial life and death. The magnitude of that gift is such that the forgiveness and the atonement are meant “for the sins of the whole world.” Note the subtle expansion of the “we” in chapter one from those writing the epistle (1:1–4) to those in the expanded fellowship of the light (1:7–10). That expansion results from the original testifying, proclaiming, and declaring, but it also comes to include those brought into the fellowship, a wider “we” who are wrapped up in the ministry of testifying, proclaiming, and declaring. The yearning of the Father reaches ever to those not yet in his marvelous fellowship of grace, and his reach extends to and through the ever expanding fellowship of the forgiven “we,” to the end of the age and the expanse of the world. (Cf. Rv 5:11–14 and 7:9–12.)

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